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Makhmudova Nodira Uktamovna
Bukhara State University, Senior Lecturer, PhD
Bukhara, Uzbekistan. E-mail: n.u.mahmudova@buxdu.uz

THE ROLE OF GOVERNANCE TRANSPARENCY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN REGIONAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

ABSTRACT

The article examines the role of governance transparency and social responsibility in regional tourism development. Tourism regions no longer compete only through heritage, infrastructure or marketing campaigns; increasingly, they compete through trust, responsible decision-making and the visible distribution of benefits among local communities. The study draws on stakeholder theory, tourism governance literature, ESG principles and official tourism policy documents. A qualitative analytical design was used: the author combined content analysis of international sustainable tourism frameworks, comparative analysis of governance indicators, and synthesis of official data on Uzbekistan's tourism growth. The novelty of the work lies in treating transparency and social responsibility not as separate values but as a single, jointly measured governance dimension for the region. The article proposes a conceptual model in which transparency reduces institutional uncertainty, social responsibility strengthens resident support, and both factors jointly improve destination resilience, visitor satisfaction and investment attractiveness. An illustrative application to Bukhara's official statistics shows that regions already publish aggregate growth data, while the indicators that reveal how benefits are shared remain unmeasured. For heritage regions such as Bukhara, the article recommends a regional tourism governance dashboard, mandatory stakeholder consultation, public reporting on community benefits, and an ESG-based code of social responsibility for tourism enterprises.

Keywords: governance transparency, social responsibility, regional tourism, sustainable tourism, destination management, ESG, stakeholder participation, social capital, community benefits.

Annotatsiya

Maqolada hududiy turizm rivojida boshqaruv shaffofligi va ijtimoiy mas’uliyatning o‘rni tahlil qilinadi. Zamonaviy turistik hududlar endilikda faqat tarixiy meros, infratuzilma yoki marketing kampaniyalari bilan raqobatlashmaydi; ular ishonch, hisobdor boshqaruv va mahalliy jamoalar manfaatini himoya qilish qobiliyati orqali ham baholanadi. Muallif manfaatdor tomonlar nazariyasi, turizm boshqaruvi adabiyotlari, ESG tamoyillari va rasmiy strategik hujjatlar asosida shaffof axborot, javobgar institutlar hamda ijtimoiy yo‘naltirilgan amaliyotlarning hududiy turizm natijalariga ta’sirini asoslaydi. Ishning yangiligi shaffoflik va ijtimoiy mas’uliyatni alohida qadriyatlar emas, balki hudud uchun yagona, birgalikda o‘lchanadigan boshqaruv o‘lchovi sifatida qarashda. Buxoro rasmiy statistikasiga illyustrativ tatbiq shuni ko‘rsatadiki, hududlar o‘sishning yalpi ma’lumotini e’lon qiladi, ammo foydaning qanday taqsimlanishini ko‘rsatadigan ko‘rsatkichlar o‘lchanmay qoladi. Xulosa sifatida Buxoro kabi meros hududlari uchun turizm boshqaruvi bo‘yicha ochiq indikatorlar paneli, majburiy jamoatchilik maslahatlari va ESG-asosli ijtimoiy mas’uliyat kodeksi taklif etiladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: boshqaruv shaffofligi, ijtimoiy mas’uliyat, hududiy turizm, barqaror turizm, destinatsiya menejmenti, ESG, manfaatdor tomonlar ishtiroki, ijtimoiy kapital, mahalliy foyda.

Аннотация

В статье анализируется роль прозрачности управления и социальной ответственности в развитии регионального туризма. Современные туристские территории конкурируют не только наследием или инфраструктурой; всё важнее становятся доверие, подотчётность и справедливое распределение выгод. Новизна работы — в рассмотрении прозрачности и социальной ответственности как единого, совместно измеряемого измерения управления. Предложена концептуальная модель и открытая панель индикаторов, обязательные консультации с заинтересованными сторонами и ESG-кодекс социальной ответственности для регионов наследия, включая Бухару.

Ключевые слова: прозрачность управления, социальная ответственность, региональный туризм, устойчивый туризм, управление дестинацией, ESG, участие заинтересованных сторон, социальный капитал, выгоды сообщества.

1. INTRODUCTION

Regional tourism has entered a stage in which growth alone no longer proves success. A destination may attract more visitors, open new hotels and increase service exports, yet still weaken its long-term competitiveness if local residents lose trust, cultural heritage faces excessive pressure, or public decisions remain closed to the people who bear the costs of tourism. This is why governance transparency and social responsibility have moved from a moral discussion to a practical management issue.

The global tourism economy illustrates the scale of the problem. The World Travel & Tourism Council reported that travel and tourism represented 9.1 per cent of global GDP in 2023 and supported almost 330 million jobs [3]. Such figures are impressive. They also make tourism governance more complicated, because the sector touches employment, public infrastructure, environmental resources and cultural identity at the same time. Where institutions communicate poorly, even profitable tourism can produce social resistance.

Uzbekistan provides a useful context for this debate. Official statistics show that in 2024 the country had 2,383 hotels and similar accommodation facilities, a sharp increase compared with the previous year [4]. The national strategy ‘Uzbekistan-2030’ sets ambitious goals for tourism exports and visitor flows [5]. These targets can stimulate investment and regional income, but they also require clearer rules of accountability.

A heritage city such as Bukhara cannot be managed only by counting arrivals. The Historic Centre of Bukhara, listed by UNESCO, is more than two thousand years old and represents one of Central Asia's most complete medieval urban fabrics [6]. Rapid tourism growth therefore creates a delicate balance: the destination needs income, but it also needs trust, care and limits.

The research problem arises from this balance. In many regional tourism systems, policy documents speak about sustainable development, yet the mechanisms of public reporting, stakeholder consultation and community benefit-sharing remain weak. Businesses often perform social responsibility through isolated charity events. Local authorities may publish general tourism numbers but avoid indicators that show how tourism revenues, employment and environmental costs are distributed. The result is a gap between declared sustainability and experienced sustainability.

This article aims to clarify the role of governance transparency and social responsibility in regional tourism development. It pursues three tasks. First, it explains how these two factors fit within sustainable tourism and ESG thinking. Second, it proposes a set of indicators that regional authorities and tourism enterprises can use without overloading small businesses. Third, it applies the argument to Uzbekistan's regional tourism conditions, with special attention to heritage destinations.

The novelty of the approach lies less in the two concepts themselves — both are well established — than in how they are combined. International instruments such as the GSTC Destination Criteria and the UN Tourism ESG Framework place transparency and social responsibility inside broader sustainability pillars or enterprise-level reporting [1; 2]. Here, by contrast, the two are treated as a single, jointly measured governance dimension for the region, in which neither is complete without the other: transparency without responsibility becomes cold accounting, and responsibility without transparency slides into public relations. Binding them into one regional indicator system, and testing that logic against official data, is the article's specific contribution.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on sustainable tourism governance has developed around a simple but difficult question: who has the right and capacity to shape tourism development? Early approaches placed the state at the centre. Later studies shifted attention to networks, stakeholder participation, local legitimacy and trust. Bramwell argues that collective action is essential for sustainable tourism because no single actor controls all the resources that shape a destination [7]. Bramwell and Lane add that governance research must look beyond formal institutions and examine power, accountability and social relations [8].

Stakeholder theory offers a strong conceptual foundation for this discussion. Freeman's stakeholder approach treats organizations as systems of relationships with groups that affect or are affected by decisions [9]. Tourism destinations fit this logic well. A hotel, a tour operator, a mahalla, a museum, a transport provider and a regional authority all influence the visitor experience, yet none of them owns the destination as a whole. Governance transparency allows these actors to see the rules of the game. Social responsibility gives them a reason to support it.

Transparency in tourism governance has several meanings. It includes open publication of tourism statistics, clear procedures for licensing and public procurement, accessible information on destination plans, and transparent reporting on the use of tourism-related funds. It also means that residents understand why a policy was chosen and who benefits from it. This last point matters: a technically open report that local people cannot read or use does not create trust.

Social responsibility has an equally broad meaning. At enterprise level it refers to fair labour practices, local procurement, respect for cultural heritage, accessible services and responsible visitor management. At regional level it involves benefit-sharing, resident participation and protection of vulnerable groups. Nunkoo links sustainable tourism governance to trust, power and social capital, showing that residents' support depends not only on economic outcomes but also on the perceived fairness of institutions [10]. In other words, people do not support tourism simply because it brings money; they support it when they believe the process is fair.

International standards increasingly connect these ideas with ESG. The GSTC Destination Criteria require sustainable management, socio-economic benefits, cultural protection and environmental responsibility [1]. The UN Tourism ESG Framework for Tourism Businesses aims to harmonise how tourism companies measure and report environmental, social and governance impacts [2]. These frameworks help destinations move from general statements to measurable obligations. Still, they need adaptation. A family guesthouse in Bukhara cannot report like a listed hotel corporation, and a regional tourism office may not have the same data systems as a mature European destination management organization.

Indicator research reaches a similar conclusion. Torres-Delgado and Saarinen emphasise that sustainable tourism indicators are useful only when they support decision-making and not merely reporting [11]. Rasoolimanesh and co-authors, reviewing indicators in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals, show that governance and stakeholder involvement remain weak points in many measurement systems [12]. For regional tourism, this means transparency and social responsibility should not remain background values; they should become visible parts of the indicator system.

Table 1. Governance transparency and social responsibility in regional tourism: conceptual links

Dimension	Practical expression	Expected regional effect	Main risk if ignored
Transparency	Open tourism data, clear licensing, public budgets, published destination plans	Higher trust, reduced uncertainty, better investor and resident confidence	Rumours, informal decision-making, suspicion toward tourism projects
Accountability	Named responsible bodies, public performance indicators, complaint channels	Better implementation discipline and lower governance fragmentation	Formal strategies without real follow-up

Social responsibility	Local employment, fair procurement, heritage care, inclusive services	Stronger resident support and wider distribution of tourism benefits	Social tension and perception that tourism serves only outsiders
Stakeholder participation	Consultations with mahalla, businesses, heritage experts and residents	More realistic projects and improved destination resilience	Resistance to policies and weak ownership of reforms

Source: developed by the author on the basis of sustainable tourism governance literature [7-12].

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The article uses a qualitative analytical design. It does not claim to replace field surveys or enterprise audits. Instead, it builds a conceptual and methodological bridge between international sustainable tourism standards and the practical governance needs of regional destinations in Uzbekistan. This choice fits the research aim: before a region measures transparency and responsibility, it has to know what exactly should be measured.

The study relies on three groups of sources. The first includes international frameworks: GSTC Destination Criteria, the UN Tourism ESG Framework, WTTC economic impact materials, and academic studies on governance and stakeholder participation. The second covers national policy documents, including the ‘Uzbekistan-2030’ strategy and official tourism statistics. The third consists of comparative tourism governance literature that explains how trust, participation and accountability influence sustainable tourism outcomes.

Four methods guide the analysis. Content analysis helped identify how transparency and social responsibility appear in international standards. Comparative analysis made it possible to adapt those ideas to regional tourism conditions. Synthesis connected enterprise-level responsibility with regional governance outcomes. Finally, indicator modelling translated the conceptual argument into a practical matrix that destinations can use for monitoring.

The proposed approach has one deliberate limitation. It avoids invented numerical survey results. Many articles use artificial percentages to look empirical, but this often weakens the credibility of the work. Here, the author uses official statistical indicators where they exist and proposes measurable indicators where data systems are still developing. This is a more cautious route, but it is safer for policy research.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The first finding is that governance transparency acts as a trust-producing mechanism. In regional tourism, trust is not abstract. It influences whether residents support new hotels, whether entrepreneurs believe licensing rules are fair, whether investors expect stable conditions and whether visitors perceive the destination as well managed. When tourism data remain closed, stakeholders fill the information gap with assumptions. Sometimes those assumptions are wrong; sometimes they are worse than the facts.

Transparency should therefore begin with basic but reliable information. Regional authorities can publish quarterly data on visitor flows, accommodation capacity, tourism-related employment, local procurement, complaints, public investments and heritage maintenance spending. These indicators do not require a complex ESG department. They require discipline. A simple dashboard, updated regularly, may do more for trust than a glossy annual report that appears once and disappears.

The second finding concerns social responsibility. Regional tourism develops sustainably only when local communities see themselves as participants, not scenery. In heritage destinations this is especially sensitive. Tourists come because local culture, architecture, crafts and everyday life create value; yet local residents often receive only indirect benefits while facing congestion, price pressure and changes in the urban environment. Social responsibility corrects this imbalance by linking tourism revenue to local employment, skills, cultural preservation and accessible public space.

The third finding is that transparency and responsibility reinforce each other. Together they create a governance cycle: open information identifies problems, stakeholder dialogue prioritises them, responsible programmes address them, and public reporting shows whether the programmes worked. The cycle is not complicated. The difficulty lies in keeping it alive after the first enthusiasm fades.

Table 2. Suggested indicators for transparent and socially responsible regional tourism governance

Block	Indicator	Unit	Data source	Interpretation
Transparency	Publication of quarterly regional tourism statistics	Yes/No; frequency	Regional tourism authority; statistics agency	Whether stakeholders can monitor tourism dynamics
Transparency	Public disclosure of tourism infrastructure spending	% of projects disclosed	Local budget reports	Reduces uncertainty around public investment
Accountability	Functional complaint and feedback channel	Number resolved / total	Tourism authority; digital platform	Measures responsiveness rather than promises
Participation	Stakeholder consultation before major projects	Consultations per project	Meeting protocols; mahalla records	Captures the voice of residents and businesses
Social responsibility	Share of local employment in tourism enterprises	%	Enterprise reports; labour statistics	Whether tourism creates local jobs
Social responsibility	Local procurement by hotels and tour operators	% of purchases	Enterprise reports; supplier contracts	Connects tourism revenue with regional producers
Heritage and inclusion	Budget for heritage care and accessible tourism	% of regional tourism budget	Budget documents	Links responsibility to cultural and inclusive outcomes

Source: author's proposal based on GSTC, UN Tourism ESG and stakeholder governance literature [1; 2; 9-12].

An illustrative application to Bukhara. The tables above are a proposal, not a measurement — but their value becomes clearer once a few of the indicators meet real data. Consider the transparency block first. Here the aggregate figures are, in fact, published and easy to verify. Bukhara region received about 1.7 million foreign tourists in 2024, and in the first eleven months of 2025 that number climbed to roughly 2.25 million, with tourism exports reaching 614.1 million US dollars [13; 16]. At the national level, the accommodation base grew to 2,383 hotels and similar facilities in the same period [4]. Against the first proposed indicator — regular publication of visitor flows and capacity — Bukhara therefore scores well: the data exist, and they circulate.

The picture changes the moment we turn to the social indicators. None of the published series answers the questions that matter most for a heritage community. Of the 614.1 million dollars in tourism exports, how much stayed with local suppliers? What share of hotel staff was hired from the region itself? How many residents were consulted before decisions on visitor routes, licensing or festival spaces? Official statistics say nothing. That silence is itself the result. The region already measures its growth with a fair degree of transparency, yet the very indicators that would show how the growth is shared — local employment, local procurement, consultation, complaint resolution — sit outside the reporting system. Applying the proposed matrix, even in this illustrative way, exposes the gap without inventing a single percentage.

In Uzbekistan, then, the need for such indicators is practical rather than theoretical. A region may know how many hotels opened, but not how many suppliers those hotels bought from locally. It may know tourist arrivals, but not whether residents were consulted before pedestrian zones, transport routes or festival spaces changed. These are not minor details; they shape the social license of tourism.

Bukhara sharpens the argument. Its historical centre attracts visitors because it offers a rare continuity of urban heritage, crafts and community life. Yet the same attraction creates pressure. If public decisions about visitor management, renovation, transport and business licensing stay closed, mistrust grows. And if local residents see tourism income pass around them rather than through them, the destination loses part of its social foundation. In this sense, social responsibility is not charity — it is risk management.

A transparent and socially responsible tourism region should work at three levels. At the enterprise level, hotels and tour operators report basic indicators: employment, training, local procurement, accessibility, complaints and heritage-sensitive behaviour. At the regional level, the destination management body consolidates these indicators and publishes them in an understandable format. At the national level, ministries align regional indicators with ESG, SDG and tourism strategy targets. The model is simple, but it prevents fragmentation (Table 3).

Table 3. Three-level model for strengthening transparency and social responsibility in regional tourism

Level	Main actors	Transparency task	Social responsibility task
Enterprise	Hotels, guesthouses, tour operators, museums	Report basic ESG and service-quality data	Employ and train local staff; buy from local suppliers; respect heritage norms
Regional	Destination body, hokimiyat, mahalla, business associations	Publish regional dashboard and project decisions	Ensure community consultation, accessible tourism and fair benefit distribution
National	Tourism Committee, Statistics Agency, ministries	Standardise indicators and connect them with official statistics	Create incentives for inclusive, responsible and heritage-sensitive tourism

Source: developed by the author.

5. DISCUSSION

The proposed model changes how regional tourism development is interpreted. Traditional planning often treats tourism growth as a sequence of promotion, arrivals, accommodation expansion and revenue. That sequence is not wrong, but it is incomplete. It says little about who participates, who trusts the process, and who carries the hidden costs. Governance transparency and social responsibility add these missing questions to the centre of analysis, and the Bukhara illustration shows why they belong there: the numbers a region chooses to publish quietly decide which of these questions can even be asked.

There is also a methodological lesson. Many sustainability systems overload destinations with dozens of indicators, and small businesses then treat reporting as a burden and avoid it. A limited set of verifiable indicators works better. A family guesthouse can report local employment, waste separation, water-saving measures and complaint handling; a regional authority can report consultations, disclosed projects and public spending. Once these habits become routine, the system can grow. The Uzbek context adds a cultural layer to this design. In many regions the mahalla remains an important social institution, and it can make tourism governance more participatory — but only if authorities treat it as a partner rather than a ceremonial channel.

Two limitations should be stated plainly. The first is structural: because the framework relies on self-reported and administrative data, it is exposed to formalism. A region can publish a dashboard and still withhold what matters; a hotel can declare responsibility and still rely on unstable contracts; a consultation can be held after the decision has been made. The framework cannot, on its own, guarantee sincerity — it can only make insincerity easier to notice, which is why it must be tied to accountability and, where possible, to independent verification. The second limitation is one of scope. The analysis is conceptual and methodological; the indicator set is grounded in official statistics and international standards, but it still awaits full empirical testing across several regions and over time. These limits do not weaken the argument so much as mark the agenda that follows from it.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Governance transparency and social responsibility are not decorative concepts in regional tourism. They determine whether tourism growth becomes a shared regional asset or a source of mistrust. The analysis shows that transparent information reduces uncertainty, accountability improves institutional discipline, stakeholder participation strengthens legitimacy, and socially responsible practices distribute benefits more fairly across the local economy.

The study's main scientific contribution is not the rediscovery of transparency or responsibility, but their integration into a single regional measurement system. Where the GSTC Destination Criteria distribute these concerns across broad sustainability pillars, and the UN Tourism ESG framework anchors them in enterprise reporting, this article binds transparency and social responsibility together as one governance dimension for the region [1; 2]. Transparency creates the information basis for trust; social responsibility turns that trust into community support; and the Bukhara data show, concretely, that a region can be transparent about its growth while remaining silent about how that growth is shared. Together, the two dimensions improve destination resilience, especially in heritage regions where cultural assets are fragile and residents live inside the tourism product itself.

For Uzbekistan, the article recommends six measures. First, regional tourism authorities should introduce a public dashboard with quarterly data on visitor flows, accommodation capacity, complaints, local employment and public tourism investments. Second, major tourism projects should pass through documented stakeholder consultation. Third, hotels and tour operators should adopt a simple ESG-based social responsibility code. Fourth, local procurement and local employment indicators should enter regional tourism monitoring. Fifth, heritage care and accessible tourism should receive separate budget lines. Sixth, social responsibility should be connected with destination marketing, so that responsible behaviour becomes a competitive advantage rather than a silent cost.

These steps do not require a heavy bureaucracy. They require a different habit of governance — speaking openly, listening early and reporting honestly. If Bukhara and other heritage destinations follow this path, Uzbekistan's tourism growth can become not only larger, but also more trusted, more inclusive and more durable.

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